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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## The Chastity of Mr. Littell<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

IF one were seeking to while away these long autumn evenings, when everyone is on strike except the few remaining Kings and Queens, and there is nothing to do but emulate Mr. Salteena and "canter after the royal barouche"—in these barren evenings, we say, it is good sport to concoct Imaginary Purgatories for Celebrated Authors. A slightly sadistic amusement, no doubt, but far more entertaining than laundering one's own collars.

What special Purgatory, for example, would bring most discomfort to Mrs. Wharton? To find herself the object of an inexorable affability in a social milieu worthy of her presence? For what was the rule devised by Mrs. Van Rensselaer Cruger in that distant past when she stooped to Letters, and was to be observed expounding through the lowly vehicle of fiction her conceptions of life and conduct? (It will be recalled that when Jane Austen was told that Mme. de Stael wished to meet the author of *Pride and Prejudice*, the ineffable Jane replied that she "wanted to be met not as an author, but as a lady.") Mrs. Cruger's advice to those desirous of achieving perfect social orientation was, as we recall it, as follows: "To your inferiors, be affable; to your equals, be indifferent; to your superiors, be haughty." Now, try to imagine Mrs. Wharton in a social environment reeking with affability—a sinister, deliberate, unescapable affability. Is not that as ideal a Purgatory as one could contrive for speeding up the most despondent of autumn evenings? And William Butler Yeats—what would be his perfect Purgatory? That is easy: To have his verse set to music by Mr. Reginald De Koven and sung by Mr. John McCormack, on the same

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<sup>1</sup> *Books and Things*, by Philip Littell. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1919.

programme with *I Plucked a Rose for You, Dear*. And Mrs. Meynell?—To discover that *The Rhythm of Life* had been pirated and serialized by *The Ladies' Home Journal*? And Mr. Thomas Hardy?—To find himself, as President of the Cheero Club, speaking kindly of God? And Mr. George Moore?—To be placed upon the Select Reading List of the Epworth League? And Miss Amy Lowell?—To be praised by Dr. Henry Van Dyke? . . . This is an unworthy occupation, to be sure; but these are direful days, and the soul needs unparalleled relaxations. So, to any one desiring to cultivate this delectable indoor sport and falling short of candidates, may we not propose an almost perfect subject?—Mr. Philip Littell, whom we do not mean to offend when we call him the most appealing of American critics.

Unfortunately, however, Mr. Littell is sensitive to torture upon so many sides that only a critic as exquisitely malicious as himself could invent imaginary Purgatories for his reception without finding the sport a little shadowed by contrition. Mr. Littell's vulnerability consists in this: He loves beauty as passionately as Congress loves water; but, unlike Congress, he spends most of his time trying to conceal the fact. He is naturally eloquent. If he had been caught young and kept away from the Best Models, he would probably today be confessing his passion for loveliness with the abandon of Swinburne writing about Victor Hugo. But Mr. Littell has been spoiled by reading too much good English prose. It has made him as jumpy and self-conscious as Mr. Chesterton confronted by the looming menace of a platitude. To some one who asked a relative of Mr. Yeats what that poetic philosopher was now busied with, the relative replied: "Oh, Willy is working hard: he is very busy trying to keep color out of his prose." That is also, apparently, Mr. Littell's prime concern. You can no more imagine him using a purplish adjective than you can imagine Miss Jane Addams using rouge. As a stylist, he exhibits an anxious chastity. Mr. Littell's perfect Purgatory, we are convinced, would be to find himself in an *Anthology of Prose-Poems*, and to know that the *Anthology* was being eternally reprinted and eternally sold out.

Probably Mr. Littell suffered in his youth some severe

literary shock. Perhaps he was read to sleep every night by the sonorous music of those incredible sentences of Oscar Wilde on the death of his mother: "Never in the most perfect days of my development as an artist could I have had words fit to bear so august a burden, or to move with sufficient stateliness of music through the purple pageant of my incommunicable woe." One can imagine Mr. Littell, as his nurse read him those plangent syllables, biting his pillow and praying that he might never, never, never, be tempted to write prose like Oscar Wilde's.

Well, so far as we know, his prayer has been granted. Mr. Littell reminds us of an observation quoted to us by Miss Rebecca West. Rebecca West, in her superb study of Henry James, remarked (quite innocently and incidentally) that Mr. James, in his early and bearded days as a newcomer in London, must have looked "like an Elizabethan seaman." A relative of Mr. James', reading this comment, protested indignantly. "Nonsense!" said she: "Henry James always looked like a gentleman." It sounds like a vicious and an unpardonable thing to assert, and we beg that we shall not be misunderstood when we say that Mr. Littell in his prose always looks like a gentleman. His literary breeding is almost oppressive. One imagines the shade of Walter Pater preparing an apology to him for the description of the Mona Lisa.

Every life, said John Addington Symonds, has its drawbacks: "The life of the saint . . . the pangs of mortified flesh. The life of the sensualist, its battles of lust and intervals of drowsy *crapula*. The life of the dreamer, its beauty of an evanescent dream, its unsatisfied, hungry, wolfish appetite." Mr. Littell is burdened with a sense of comedy so urgent that it is as inconvenient as a nail cut below the quick. It will not let him enjoy the normal recreations of freer souls—he has probably never known the experience of losing his self-control as a writer and reporting with gusto some deep delight, some gorgeous and implacable animosity. One cannot fancy him writing passionately in praise or blame—his sense of humor would not sanction that degree of seriousness. Life seems to him a thing not worth losing one's poise over. An impregnable detachment is figured to us as the only position tolerable to an intelligent man. He would smile at Baudelaire's con-

viction that "to be just, and to have any reason for existence, criticism should be partial, passionate . . . that is to say, made from a standpoint of exclusive vision." Mr. Littell is a satirist—one of the most delectable in contemporary English criticism. But he is also an emotionalist; and his emotionalism is what the worthy Dr. Freud calls "over-corrected." This has given rise in his literary behavior to various neuroses. It has made him self-conscious. He is too deliberately at ease; he is too inflexibly unmoved; one cannot imagine him knowing the wild and guilty joy of writing like a damned fool. He is as disconcerting an apparition as the little girl at the party who is superior to ice-cream.

It is a pity. One wishes for an American critic as incomparably malicious as Mr. Littell, as free from *cliches*, as unfaltering in tact and taste, as irresistible in mockery, as delicately and justly sensitive, without his too generous endowment of phobias. To be able to say that George Moore "has labored with zest to restrict the area of the unmentionable"; to be able to say of Max Beerbohm's prose that it exhibits "an almost masculine intuition into the essential virtue of words"; that "many a mannered sentence would have died of preciousness if he had not kept it alive by his mockery of its beauty"; and of John Jay Chapman's tribute to his son Victor that in it "he and his mother come to life again, and will live with a tragic intensity forever, in this Memoir, where Mr. Chapman speaks of them with a passion of candor that is lonelier than any reticence"—to be able to perceive and report like that is to cause one to look upon American criticism with a lighter heart. Mr. Littell has made stupidity seem grosser, and beauty and intelligence matters not wholly unattainable.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.